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PLAY IN EDUCATION

BY ANNIE DOUGLAS SEVERANCE

A NEW art has come into being during the last decade, that of directing the play of children. And because of its potentialities for developing the individual, and the race, it has already taken its place among the important progressive movements of the world.

In actual fact organized play is older than organized education. A system of athletics and games was the centre of the educational principles in ancient Persia, Greece, and Rome, and was doubtless founded upon the spontaneous pursuit of play activities in children, through which from earliest times they have instinctively acquired their motor co-ordinations, trained their judgements, and formed their social habits.

Some system of play seems originally to have been the basis in a measure for all methods of education. Various channels of opposing thought have at times broken in, but the play spirit has persistently reappeared, in growing development, and constructiveness of form, and it would seem that play must everywhere have had some great purpose, or it would not everywhere have survived.

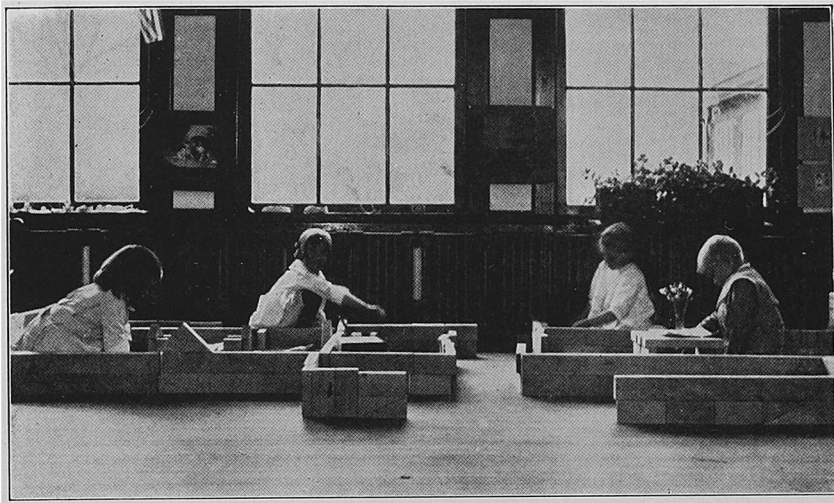
During the early part of the Christian era its disappearance was almost complete, for the thought of the time tended toward preparation for a future life, rather than for this, and the body was regarded as evil, and to be kept in subjection to the spirit. With the Renaissance the body was once more glorified; emphasis was again laid upon individuality, and scholastic learning returned, though only for the few. The cult was essentially an aristocratic

one. Attention was directed toward the classical literature, with delight in its æsthetic appeal, and by pursuit of learning a man became superior to the common herd, and set apart as a scholar, rather than prepared in any way for daily life.

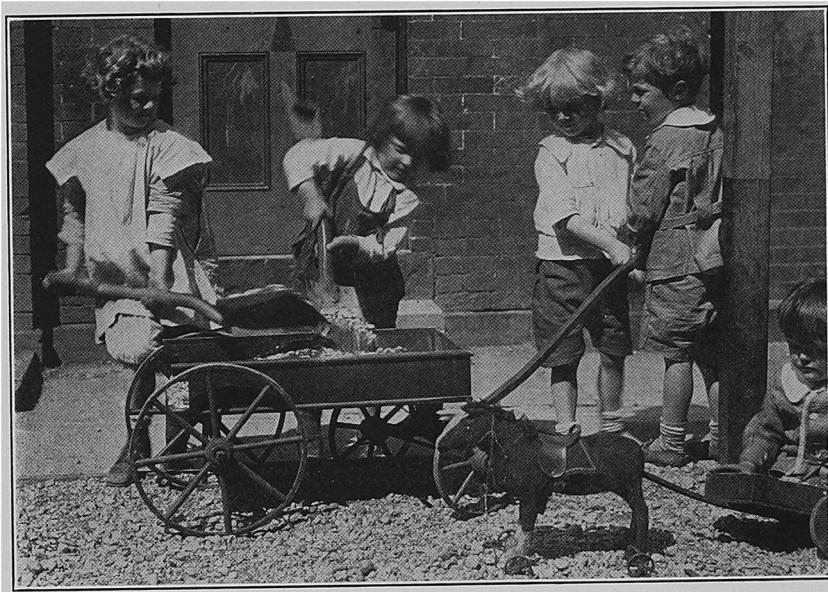
The Reformation was the outgrowth of the Renaissance, and for the next three hundred years religious formalism held sway. Rousseau was the first to feel the emotional reaction to the period, and to become the exponent of naturalness. Pestalozzi had a faint glimmer of the truth in his attempt to psychologise education, and Herbart was the turning point in the psychological movement when he emphasized the necessity of studying the needs and powers of the individual child. Froebel later took the common activities of life and gave them a setting of song in the kindergarten, teaching the development of the inborn capacities and powers of the child through self-activity, or motor expression.

It is only within the last hundred years that the ideas of these leaders crystalized into a public school system for the masses, universal in civilized countries. It absorbed most of the time and energy, however, which children in previous ages had put into play, and during the last century, says one educator, play probably reached the lowest ebb during the history of the world.

There are many sources from which the modern play movement has sprung, but one of the most important is the new psychology. As soon as attention was turned from the course of study to the child it was



“There are blocks to build railroads and houses . . .”



“Horses and carts that they may harness . . .”

PLAY IN WORK

discovered that play was the form of education which nature had devised during the long period of biological evolution, and that the child, deprived of play, was cut off from those stimuli to which his mind most readily reacted. The new psychology has made the child the centre of educational effort, and has come to realize that no study can be educative that does not stimulate his mind and arouse it to action. Present-day thought is that so far as man is a spiritual being he can be paid only in spiritual values, and no amount of money can reward him for a life that is not worth living, or for work that is not worth doing; therefore education must serve to develop his fullest powers, and fit him for a life of the largest usefulness and happiness.

Out of this has grown the Project Method, in which children in the kindergarten and primary grades motivate their own work, originating their own projects, or working out those given them. Traditional methods may be discarded, and the teacher go to any source to find other materials which more adequately serve the purpose. The various mediums are valued primarily as the means by which the children may give expression to their ideas.

Naturally their greatest interest and concentration will be given to occupations motivated by their own interests; and thus they work for large standards, the qualities that make men successful, initiative, the ability to express themselves and to solve problems. It is the active standard as opposed to the old passive one of obedience, orderliness, courtesy, and consideration, which limits children to lesser ideals that fit only for the next grade, or a continuation of school life, and all of which are disposed of naturally, while allowing qualities of leadership to develop, as they do, unconsciously, when children play freely together.

It has been argued that if children only do the pleasant things which are involved in play they will not wish to do the unpleasant things involved in work, and will escape necessary discipline. This is probably true if children do only the pleasant things in play. But playing in friendship with a group of children subject to the laws of justice and kindness is perhaps discipline enough at this stage. Later they cannot escape the discipline of advanced studies, games in which they must become proficient, and the disciplinary experiences of life. Play furnishes an adequate motive for practice that brings its own discipline.

The play impulse has found its most radical expression during the last few years in the Play School in New York, and in the Demonstration Play School at the University of California. In the latter three acres of ground covered with fine old oak and eucalyptus trees takes the place of a schoolhouse. The equipment is of the simplest character, consisting of tables, a platform and piano for rhythmic and musical activities, quantities of large boxes, and blocks, and sand boxes, workbenches, and black-boards which are nailed to the trees. Near by is a plot of ground for experiments with plant life. Water is piped to the grounds for drinking and toilet purposes, as well as for the animals which the children use in their animal experimentations. All the activities are conducted outdoors, and the school is a demonstration of a school organization covering each day through the entire year, from birth to adolescence, based on a present-day interpretation of child nature and the conditions of modern social life. An eminent professor of biology, after observing the groups at their various occupations, remarked: "I walked about the play-school grounds this morning, and it is hard for me yet to

say that I have not been dreaming. All my life I have dreamed of a school that would allow children to live and develop normally while they are being instructed in the arts that man has developed. I could only dream because I couldn't get far enough away from our traditional school organization to see how my ideal could be accomplished. But I saw it this morning, and my life dream is realized."

The New York Play School differs from the formal kindergarten and the Montessori Schools in that it is neither a teaching nor a training system. It acknowledges the separate individualities of the children, and aims to furnish the conditions for growth so far as it knows them. The world for children to become discoverers in and eager inquirers about is thrown open to them through play materials which are selected with the thought of providing fascinating opportunities for them to dramatise the world with which they are becoming acquainted. There are blocks to build railroads and houses, horses and carts that they may harness exactly as the horses in the street are harnessed, drawing materials that they can use for the free expression of whatever stored-up impressions are in their minds, clay to be moulded into the shape of whatever they wish, a bench and tools to make toys. They assist the cooking teacher, help her market, collect the luncheon money, and keep the books. They play store, and thereby learn the fundamental arithmetic processes before they handle large numbers. They are separated into three, four and five, six and seven, and eight-year

old groups, that their interests and activities may function from their own points of view, and the function of the teachers is to enrich each child's performance, to awaken and help him to satisfy his curiosity, to direct him to sources of information, and to help him adjust his social difficulties.

For older children the School Festival is undertaking a ministry of high importance, that of infecting school life with more joy in its employment of the gifts and capacities of the child. The Ethical Culture School in New York is one of the foremost exponents of the Festival as a source of culture. The term covers much that is a renaissance of the perishing folk life of the past, and by what it contains of real beauty is meant to combat the music-hall, cinema-palace, and other entertainment of a like class that constitutes the popular culture of to-day.

Books might be, and have been, written upon existing play-grounds, and the modern conditions which have made them so great a boon to the children of the cities. The entire play movement seems significant of a growing wisdom of life, the signs of which, as Montaigne has said, are joy, gladness, and unconstrained rejoicing. There is no doubt that the trend of modern thought is in the direction of self-expression and the psychology of feeling. Dr. G. Stanley Hall has said that the sentiments constitute three-fourths of life, and it may very well be that as the education of the past has been of the head, that of the future will be of the heart, and the spirit.